From "deaf" to "Deaf": Defining Deaf Culture

Barbara J. White
Gallaudet University

Twenty five years have passed since I entered the world of "Deaf culture"—although the term was not yet prevalent or even coined in the early 1970s. On the basis of my audiogram, I qualified for admission to Gallaudet University, the only liberal arts college for Deaf[1], deaf, and hard of hearing students, which was known to be the "mecca" of the Deaf world. Although Gallaudet is located in the same city where I was born, I was never exposed to the cultural side of my deafness until my early 20s. Up until that point, my deafness was defined from a clinical/medical perspective, and I grew up with the hopeful and well-meaning message from family and friends that "one day there will be a cure for deafness." When I entered Gallaudet and met other deaf people, I felt as if I were "at home among strangers" (Schein, 1989) and felt a sense of normalcy that I had not before experienced. This paper describes the identifying features of Deaf culture, which may help explain to those unfamiliar with a cultural view of deafness the profound sense of pride and feelings of normalcy of those deaf persons who identify with Deaf culture.

Before describing Deaf culture, it is helpful to look at the opposing perspective, the clinical/medical perspective, which has dominated professional thinking for hundreds of years. This literature excluded the voices of deaf people themselves. This perspective emphasizes the audiological aspects of hearing loss, prevention of deafness, technological and surgical advances to eradicate deafness (including cochlear implants), and the comparison of differences between hearing and deaf people's psychosocial and educational development. There is no room in this view for considering the idea of a deaf culture or consideration of deafness as a human difference, since deafness is viewed as an affliction that must be cured. In this paradigm, the expectation is for deaf people to function like hearing persons and interact as normally as possible in the mainstream. This model is a "deficit" model since it focuses on the deaf person's deficiencies—deficits in language and literacy, cognition, mental health, and psychosocial development instead of the person's strengths.

The deficit model has also been associated with the oral philosophy in education of deaf children, which disavows the use of sign language and proclaims that developing good speech and lipreading skills are the paths to higher social and educational attainment for deaf children and adults. Role models for deaf children under this paradigm are usually hearing persons or oral deaf adults who do not use sign language. Successful Deaf role models are considered a threat to this perspective, since they may jeopardize the economic survival of many in the helping professions whose livelihood deafness depends (Lane, 1992). Deaf people are viewed as incomplete and defective individuals in need of rehabilitation (Reagan, 1985, 1990.) The oralist philosophy is also ingrained in the clinical/medical model which is reflected in the oral language bias of hearing persons.

A cultural model of deafness, in contrast, presents deafness in a sociocultural framework—deafness is viewed as one aspect of human diversity, a natural condition where Deaf people are viewed as a linguistic minority with a rich, vibrant culture. This perspective gained strength during the 1960s with the first linguistic analyses of American Sign Language (ASL). The work of William Stokoe (1961) provided legitimacy to ASL and led to the paradigm shift in some educational and research quarters. Other writers began to claim that deafness needed to be "depathologized" (Woodward, 1982) and that deaf people in America simply view their lives from "a different center" than hearing people do (Padden and Humphries, 1988). Stokoe and Battison (1981) called for

deaf children to be exposed to ASL as early as possible in order to develop a language base, but more importantly, to enhance self esteem and prevent major mental health problems.

The cultural view of deafness disavows the deviancy-based medical view which perceives deafness as an impairment that must be fixed or at least rehabilitated. Proponents of this view assert that deafness does not constitute a disability and point out that culturally Deaf people place higher value on American Sign Language than on the improvement of speech and lipreading. Deaf cultural pride is a predominant value as is the perpetuation of Deaf culture. Medical advances to "cure" deafness are frowned upon, with some calling the cochlear implant surgery a path towards "cultural genocide" (Lane, 1993).

Elements of Deaf Culture. The single most distinguishing feature of American Deaf culture is the value placed on American Sign Language as the primary language for communication. ASL (or the signed language of other international Deaf communities) is hallmark of Deaf culture. ASL allows its users to adapt to the biological necessity of a visual language and increases a sense of belonging to other Deaf people. Deaf people for centuries have been an oppressed language minority in all parts of the world, and this alienation from the hearing mainstream serves to increase the sense of affiliation with other deaf people (Schein, 1989). Communication barriers as well as communication comfort with those who share a common language seem to perpetuate the existence of Deaf culture.

In addition to the primacy of American Sign Language, Deaf culture includes the values, attitudes and experiences shared by this community, as well as cultural norms and phenomenon such as intermarriage rates, material culture, symbols, organizational structure, literature and art (White, 1996).

Values. Values that Deaf people cherish include a strong positive regard for ASL as well as the rejection of the clinical/medical perspective of deafness. A high value is placed on educating Deaf children at state residential schools, since it is here that the heritage and culture of Deaf people are transmitted through generations and where deaf children are exposed to adult Deaf role models, often for the first time. There is a high regard for deaf children who symbolize the continuation of Deaf culture. Deaf parents are often pleased at the diagnoses of deafness in their infants much to the astonishment of physicians who convey the diagnosis (Schlesinger and Meadow, 1972; Lane, 1992; Lane, Bahan, Hoffmeister, 1996).

Shared attitude and experience. Identifying with Deaf culture is not a matter of how much hearing loss one has, but rather one's attitude (Padden, 1980). Attitudinal deafness means that the person has identified with the group and demonstrates cultural pride in the group and its goals. This pride almost always includes acceptance and use of American Sign Language. Experiences of discrimination, feelings of oppression and struggles related to equal access to public accommodations are examples of shared in-group experiences.

Norms. Certain rules of behavior are expected in Deaf culture. Examples are stomping on the floor or flicking on the light switches to get someone's attention, raising and shaking hands in the air, instead of clapping, for applause; standing at a greater distance when communicating in order to utilize the entire upper body for sign communication; and anticipating personal questions (such as whether one has Deaf or hearing parents) when being introduced to someone new. Deaf people touch each other more than hearing people do, such as when entering a conversation as well as saying goodbye (Kyle, 1990). In group settings, such as classrooms and meetings, chairs are placed in a circle so that visual communication is easily seen, rather than in rows facing the presenter. Sometimes these "Deaf culture" norms come in conflict when Deaf and hearing people come together, as seen in the following vignette:

A cultural conflict presented itself at a funeral of a prominent Deaf man. During visiting hours

at the funeral home, all the chairs were set up by the funeral home staff in rows on both sides of the coffin. When Deaf people started arriving, the chairs on one side were placed in a circle, allowing visual communication to take place so that deaf visitors could share stories about the deceased. Hearing family members on the other side of the room sat stoically in the chairs placed in rows and looked upon the Deaf visitors who had rearranged the chairs and actively communicating in signs on the other side with some displeasure. Lingering to say "goodbye" after a social occasion is typical, and it is a common practice to show displays of physical affection by hugging. Other rules such as not exaggerating lip movements when signing, and not trying to speak and sign at the same time are accepted norms.

Intermarriage rate. The Deaf community has perhaps the highest intermarriage rate of any disabled group; 85-95% of Deaf people marry other Deaf people. Although there is no empirical evidence, divorce rates may be higher when deaf people marry hearing spouses (Schein, 1992).

Formal organizational structure. The structure of formal organizations of Deaf people is elaborate, ranging from local to international in scope. The National Association of the Deaf, the World Federation of the Deaf, the National Athletic Association of the Deaf, the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf, and Telecommunications of the Deaf, Inc. are perhaps the most well known. Most large cities have a local Deaf club where members plan social, educational, and political events—although the importance of the Deaf club has declined with the increase in telecommunications technology, captioned television and home videotapes, and in some cities, open captioning of first-run movies in public theaters.

Material culture. Assistive devices that allow Deaf people to adapt to a visual mode of communication include tangible objects like TTYs (teletypewriter devices), baby crier signals, strobe smoke detectors, flashing or vibrating alarm clocks, television decoders for receiving closed captioned programs, and most recently, two-way pagers with visual displays, and two-way video technology using computers to communicate in sign language to another party over the telephone.

Symbols. Many cultures have symbols marking the existence of the culture. There are several symbols signifying the existence of Deaf culture in America such as the "I Love You" handshape in American Sign Language, which has been printed on a U.S. Postal stamp and frequently used in public by politicians to recognize Deaf constituents. Another symbol is the picture of an ear with a slash through it, most often seen at airports, to designate the location of a TTY (telephone with a teletypewriter keyboard), which is a requirement for access under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Literature and art. Deaf culture has a rich body of literature, folklore, poetry, theater and art. There are works of ASL history, poetry, plays and folklore. The Emmy award-winning television program, "Deaf Mosaic," formerly produced at Gallaudet University, portrayed Deaf people's lives and culture. Deaf artists often portray the language oppression within the Deaf community. For example, one such painting by Betty G. Miller, shows two hands in chains, symbolizing the oralist stance against sign language and prohibition of signing in schools for deaf children. The acclaimed National Theater of the Deaf has achieved international recognition of Deaf people in the arts. Deaf actors and actresses are becoming more common in Hollywood and have formed their own organization to advocate the hiring of deaf actors and actresses for deaf roles and have organized some protests against movie and television producers who select hearing people over deaf people in those roles.

This paper does not attempt to stereotype Deaf people as a homogeneous group, but rather to explain the commonalities of those Deaf people who share a cultural view of themselves. The American Deaf community is in fact quite heterogeneous and represents a microcosm of American

society in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and disability, as well as religious and political diversity. I have attempted here to incorporate the commonly accepted characteristics of the term "Deaf culture" which is also congruent with my own experience from my journey as a deaf person to a Deaf person.

References

Dolnick, E. (1993). Deafness as culture. *The Atlantic Monthly.* September. 37-53.

Erickson, W. (1992) Deaf culture: In search of the difference. *Journal of the American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association.*

Humphries, T. (1993). Deaf culture and cultures. In K. Christensen & G. Delgado (Eds.) *Multicultural Issues in Deafness.* Longman, Inc., 3-14.

Jacobs, L. (1989). The community of the deaf. *A Deaf Adult Speaks Out.* Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 86-95.

Kyle, J. (1990). The deaf community culture, custom and tradition. In S. Prillwitz & T. Villhabor (Eds.) *Sign Language Research and Applications: Proceeding of the International Conference.* Hamburg, Germany: Signum Press.

Lane, H. (1992). The infirmity and cultural models of Deaf people. *The mask of benevolence: Disabling the deaf community.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 13-28.

Lane, H. (1993). Constructions of deafness. *Deafness: 1993-2013.* Silver Spring, MD: National Association of the Deaf.

Neisser, A. (1983). *The other side of silence: Sign language and the Deaf community in America.* New York: Knopf.

Padden, C. (1980). The deaf community and the culture of deaf people. In C. Baker & R. Battison (Eds.) *Sign Language and the Deaf Community.* Silver Spring, MD: National Association of the Deaf, 89-103.

Padden, C. & Humphries, T. (1988) *Deaf in America: Voices from a culture.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Reagan, T. (1985). The deaf as a linguistic minority: Educational considerations. *Harvard Educational Review*, 55, 265-277.

Reagan, T. (1990). Cultural considerations in the education of deaf children. In D. Moores and K. P. Meadow-Orlans (Eds.) *Educational and developmental aspects of deafness.* Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press. 73-84.

Schein, J. (1989). *At home among strangers.* Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.

Shapiro, J.P. (1993). The deaf celebration of separate culture. *No pity.* New York: Time Books. 72-104.

Stokoe, W.C. & Battison, R. (1981). Sign language, mental health, and satisfactory interaction. In. L.K. Stein, E.D. Mindel, and T. Jabaley (Eds.) *Deafness and mental health.* 179-194. New York: Grune and Stratton.

Wax, T. (1995). Deaf community. *Encyclopedia of Social Work.* 19th edition. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Woodward, J. (1989). How you gonna get to heaven if you can't talk with Jesus:: The educational establishment vs. the deaf community. In S. Wilcox (Ed.) *American Deaf Culture, An Anthology.* Silver Spring, MD: Linstock Press, 163-172.

White, B. (1996). Yes, there is a deaf culture. In Makas, E., & Schlesinger, L. (Eds.) *End results and starting points: Expanding the field of disability studies.* Portland, ME: The Society for Disability Studies and the Edmund S. Muskie Institute of Public Affairs.

Endnote

(1) The uppercase *D* will refer to culturally Deaf persons—those members of the Deaf community who identify with the values and goals of the Deaf community and use American Sign Language. The lowercase *d* will be used when referring only to the auditory condition of deafness or those deaf people who do not interact with the Deaf community or identify themselves with Deaf culture.